(Turning Asylum Inside Out)

One very important element which Clarke and like-minded colleagues would have discounted, thanks to their one-sided and hostile reading or wholesale dismissal of patients' writings, is the role of the Asylum itself, in others words of "therapy," in causing rather than curing mental illness. Mr. Peters, admitted in March of 1909, and diagnosed by Dr. Clarke as a case of paranoid dementia praecox with "grandiose notions," found the Asylum physically and morally damaging. Something of a projector, he had editorialized in newpapers on the importance of fresh air; he was understandably offended by the Asylum's notoriously bad heating arrangements, in particular the "dirty, toublesome fireplaces .... injurious to the health of many inmates."

Mr. Peters was even more offended by the Asylum's moral atmosphere, the "nerve-wrecking filthy and blasphemous language by inmates," and the harsh punishment by staff of patients' "objectionable habits which they have been allowed and given time to practice and cultivate until mania develops." He later eloped, and in a letter complained to Dr. Clarke that he had "acquired the art of `picking' door locks as one result of being imprisoned in a Government institution for crazy people."

Miss Dickens, admitted for the first time in 1895, had similar complaints. She wrote to Dr. Ross on April 7, 1922, describing her first visit to the Asylum nearly thirty years ago. After fortnight-long periods of insomnia every few months, and her "unconscious mind ... registering all the filthy remarks and the brutal treatment," she really went mad. It seems she also learned how to masturbate, or her ward-mates did, since "anyone can hear just how Toronto [Asylum] teaches immorality to the young." She developed the governmental status of the institution into the idea that she and other female patients were "Government Bonded White Slaves (otherwise known as patients in the Queen St Asylum)," the nurses a "huge criminal organization."

Miss Dickens's complaint is convincing in its details, even if her overall construction of them sometimes seems improbable. She remembers the time she was a patient on Ward 5. Her first Supervisor was Miss Campbell, under whom "everything was fine." But under Miss Campbell's successor, Miss Middleton, "it was hell." According to Miss Dickens, Supervisor Middleton "actually killed" a patient, "and she did it in less than three weeks."